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LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following, not strictly a letter, was sent to us by the Headmaster of Ripon Hall, in England, and is a useful evaluation of an evangelistic programme undertaken by the students of Ripon Hall.

## RIPON HALL "MISSION OF FRIENDSHIP"

The following notes are a précis of the answers to a questionnaire by twenty six Ripon Hall students who took part in the "Mission of Friendship" in Wimbledon. As a background for the answers, may we first give a brief summary of the nature of the Mission. We took as a guide the book by Tom Allan, "The Face of my Parish". The Mission had the support of the whole parish of Wimbledon; it concentrated, however, on the two districts of St. John and St. Mark, which are in the less prosperous areas of the parish, and where the two churches for various reasons were smaller in numbers. The Mission had been extremely well prepared, with a letter from the Vicar to the houses in the district, a card index based on the electoral roll, and a first visit to the houses prior to the Mission by many people in the churches concerned. During the Mission itself, our students took part in the regular activities of the two churches, visited schools in the districts, and held four special lunch-hour services. Apart from this, no other special services or meetings were held and we concentrated entirely on house to house visitation. The students had in their hands for these visits special literature. They were asked not to spend time with regular church members but to concentrate as far as possible on people on the fringe of the Church or outside the Church. They were asked to make what suggestions they could for linking people up with the churches and their activities, and to take what opportunities they could for pastoral contacts and talks with the people they visited. A few weeks later they were given this questionnaire, partly in the hope that from it there might come suggestions for the follow-up in Wimbledon, and partly also in the hope that there might come from it suggestions for future missions. We give therefore the questions with a précis of the answers received.

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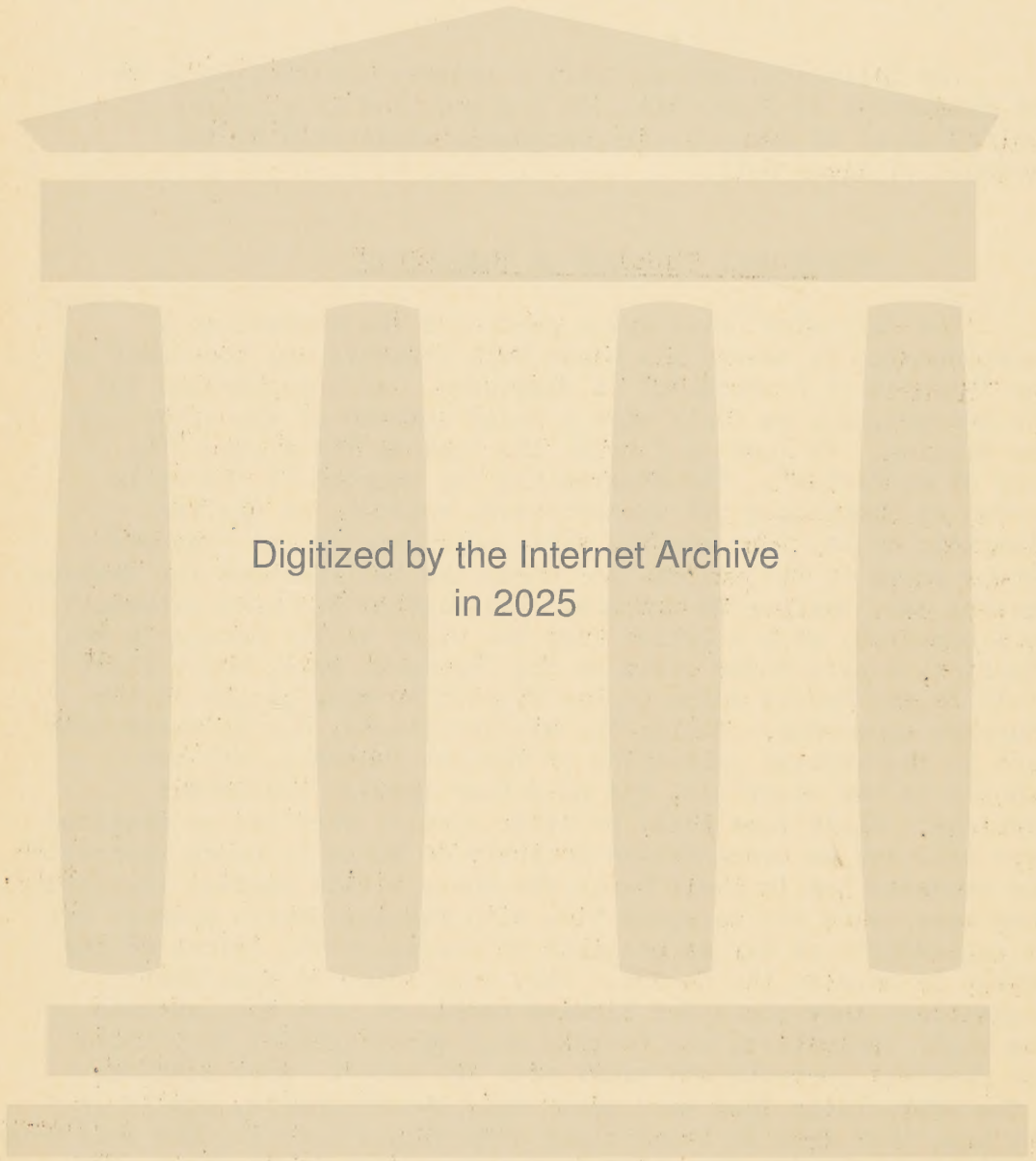

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Can you suggest any other forms of preparation in the districts for the Mission than those actually carried out?

In many cases there was no comment on this question, implying therefore appreciation of the preparation that had been made. One or two valuable comments however do emerge.

Several people suggested that it would have been valuable to have more contact at the outset with the people in the existing church fellowship, and especially with those who had done the preliminary work. Consider the comments: "I think we should have been introduced to the church people at the start of the Mission." "More liaison between parish workers and mission, both before and during the Mission. The parish worker's experiment is too valuable to be neglected. A general get-together when cards were issued, would have been most valuable."

Several people suggested that there might have been better advertisement, whether through posters, or the local press, or cinemas. Consider for instance the following comments: "I would recommend the enthusiastic cooperation by the local press two or three weeks before the date of the Mission. A series of suitable articles might be considered." "A more extensive and subtle build-up might be made through the medium of the admittedly sympathetic local press with informative write-ups on religion and what it is all about." The comment, "Not without a larger budget for advertising", rightly points out that large posters do involve heavy cost.

Having tried this "visitation Evangelism" do you consider that it is the best method of Evangelism in such a parish under present conditions?

The great majority answered "Yes", and some added useful comments. One reply said that there is no "best" method. Two who said "Yes", added the reasons: "Yes, because it is personal. It may be slow, but I consider it is sure." "I am certain that there is no more effective method of evangelism. People are far more open in asking questions in the privacy of their homes than in the presence of friends and workmates." A few replies to this and other questions suggested that if time and numbers allowed, a visitation evangelism such as this might be combined with more services and meetings to which people might be invited.

Several replies suggested in one form or another the importance of the follow-up. For example, "Yes, but it still leaves many untouched." "Yes, if seen as part of a long process with few quick results." "It is a good way of individual evangelism, and one which seems to me may be more lasting if, and only if, a constant follow-up is possible." "Yes, but I think the most effective is the Christian fellowship and witness of church members."

What general impressions did you form with regard to the attitude of the people (a) to Christ ?

On this and the following questions there was one general comment, with which others would probably agree, "This is extremely difficult to generalise, as the attitude of people differed a great deal, as it naturally would in a parish as mixed as Wimbledon."

A few answered, "Not hostile." Several answered "Indifferent; many people were quite indifferent, but not unbelieving." The majority answered,"sympathetic;" with the following representative comments: "Uninformed, childhood belief." "Signs of devotion or commitment not easily brought out." "Taking Him for granted without thinking much about Him or considering the implications of His claims." "Many seemed to be searching, longing, for that 'something which they felt was missing in their lives', and were more than prepared to acknowledge that Christ was that 'something', but some were doubtful how to find Him, and a few doubted that the Christian Church as it is today provided the means." "Many seemed unconscious of any connection between the Church and religion, and the Person of Our Lord."

(b) to the Christian Church?

As one would expect, the answers here were a little more negative. One or two said "friendly". "Friendly in the main, though people are not aware of its relationship to Christ." One replied: "An obvious hostility was shown by a minority only, about 20 %, and it was prevalent in people between twenty and forty years of age. Yet even here there was sometimes willingness to discuss matters seriously." One replied, "Very critical and rather hostile. A general impression that church people were not living up to their profession of faith." A great many came away with an impression of apathy, indifference, and a general sense of the irrelevance of the Church. This is so general an impression, and so important, that it is interesting to illustrate it with a number of comments. "A useful institution, but not related to the pattern and rhythmn of their life." "Generally couldn't care less." "Friendly, but not their concern." "No hostility; the Church is there when we want it." "Insufficient conviction of the need for all to make the work of the Church their concern." "The majority of people seemed to think the Church too aloof." "It was often depressing to see the non-relevance in many minds, even when dimly aware of a need for redemption".

(c) to the actual work of the Church in this parish?

Before we summarize the answers here it must be said that criticisms are not criticisms of the present Incumbents. In one of the districts visited, we know that there had been a number of rapid changes of Incumbents, and that the work of the Church, and especially its visiting, had suffered.

One or two people commented that friendliness was met with friendliness. "Promising reactions to the approach emphasizing the angle of friendship." There was one comment that people were "sympathetic", saying or implying that the clergy were doing their best in a task which some thought impossibly big."

There was a very general impression of ignorance, both about the Church in general, and about its work in these districts. "People generally aren't instructed in the nature and necessity of the Christian Church." "The Church is a building where services and things happen, but not the Body of Christ." Several people noticed in one form or another a sense of surprise that the Church should be taking an interest in them. "People are pleased that the Church in this parish is interested in them and their welfare. For many it was a surprise, they were not otherwise aware of the Church's work here". "They seemed surprised that the Church

had gone out to them." Obviously, this sense of gratified surprise where it exists, underlines the immense importance of visiting, both on a Mission and in the general work of the Church. "If it were possible, they would appreciate more visiting."

There were one or two points of detailed criticism. "Puzzled about the nature of the parish with multiple churches." "St. John's not well known, but the 'class' respectability of the parish church and Emmanuel put some off." "The frequent change of a priest-in-charge of St. Mark's district is badly felt, and has a noticeable effect on some people." With these exceptions there was very little detailed criticism; people cannot criticise what they do not know, and the general impression was rather one of a radical ignorance of the Church, its nature and its work.

Having discussed and compared your experience in this visitation evangelism with your friends, what points of technique for house-to-house visiting for lay people would you suggest? (a) for further work in this parish?

This question and the next produced a number of very valuable related comments. A few people noticed rightly that visiting is very much a matter of the inspiration of the moment, and either there is no "technique" or each person must develop his own technique. On the other hand there are certain methods of approach, which one can only learn in experience; and the comment is valuable for training both in parishes and in theological colleges - "It might encourage beginners especially, if they were able to accompany an experienced interviewer on a few calls, before being sent out on their own. The learner would take only a small part and would primarily observe."

There were general comments underlying the methods which were actually used, personal contacts, an approach of friendliness, the offer of practical help, always some literature in one's hand to offer and to provide an initial point of contact. One comment sums up these general points, and at the same time makes the important point that we build people into the membership of the Church by giving them some responsible share in that membership. "More and more visiting on the lines of our Mission, to seek people out, discover their problems, and bring help and friendship wherever possible. To give people the sense that they matter, and wherever possible the sense of responsibility to their Church, by giving them tasks; perhaps to bring children to Church, pass on magazines to friends; and so on."

(b) for any similar Mission in the future?

The following quotations all give valuable suggestions for methods of approach in such visitation evangelism.

"Make the point about friendship early." "Promises to pray for those in need are especially appreciated." "Show that loving our neighbour means helping him or her on whatever level help is needed." "At the outset avoid direct questions such as, 'Why do you not attend church?'" "Show interest in the family, enquire after them by name, discuss housing problems, occupations of members of the family etc., and reasons for non-attendance will usually appear incidentally." "Don't overplay and press the ball, take it gently on a first visit, which should be short, followed by frequent follow-ups." "If argument develops, don't defend the record of the Church, politics, war, education; point only to Jesus, what of Him?

People gladly criticize the Church, etc. Welcome this, don't defend, lead them from the Church to Christ, because so often they don't believe. To make people aware of His challenging reality is the only goal." "The great need is to make it clear that each individual in the community matters to the clergy and to the Church."

Did you find that payer was welcomed in the homes you visited?

The answers to this question were varied. Amongst those who said "No" there was an interesting comment. "In most cases it would have been wildly inappropriate and might have helped the comfortable feeling of those who say, 'We listen to the wireless services'." There may be a danger that listening to wireless prayers in the home, and even direct praying in the home, becomes a substitute for joining in the corporate worship of the Church.

Amongst those who said "Yes" there were the comments, "Where there were problems, yes." "Yes, people want to pray and to find the consolation and comfort of God, even the unlikeliest." "In a number of cases I found it absolutely essential. Where need of any description appeared, it must at least be suggested. I had cases where no results could be achieved, and yet prayer was greatly welcomed. Already the suggestion of prayer broke barriers down. No visit should be without it being suggested."

In general the replies suggest that one should only pray with people when it seemed natural and easy to do so; on the other hand that the creation of an atmosphere in which it seems natural and easy depends not only on the person visiting but on the person visited, and that we all need more aid and training in learning to pray naturally with one another.

Some might criticize a "Mission of Friendship" as too vague a title, in a day when a direct proclamation of the Gospel is urgent and vital. Would you agree with such a criticism, or do you think the title was effective, as an offer of friendship from the Church?

One reply said that "the title is much too vague if this were intended as a full scale evangelistic mission." The great majority of the replies said that it was effective as a title, and a few replies emphasize this, and gave reasons for the value of the title as an approach in evangelism. We may notice in particular the interesting comment, "The title was effective without being in any way obtrusive, and could scarcely be bettered." "It was unusual, and emphasized an aspect of Christianity that too easily may be ignored. It gave a helpful opening to the proclamation of the friendship of God for Man." "The vagueness of the title was good in itself, for it allowed scope for personal initiative. Presenting too strong a delivery of message to houses would have led to confusion with the Jehovah's Witnesses, which would have been a disadvantage." "All those to whom I have described our Mission have agreed that the most effective form of Christian witness is for church people to go on extending the hand of friendship. This agrees with the recent statement of the Bishop of Edinburgh that 'the artisan of today can only be loved back into the fellowship of the Church.' "

Have you any other general comments or suggestions other than those covered by the above questions?

Several people commented on the urgency of the follow-up. "The Mission can only be successful if followed up immediately and vigorously." "Maintain contact with the agnostic element and particularly with lax church people." "Everything depends on the follow-up." In this connection we may also quote the comment, "A good, comprehensive card index of contacts, kept up to date with full and fresh details; one soul, one card, is a most useful instrument." We notice also the comment, "As a common excuse for non-attendance was young children; if provision could be made for this, it might add to 'friendship' by an offer of 'service'."

On the Mission itself we may note the comments: "In spite of extra cost, would not a really prominent advertising campaign have been most valuable? Many people we called on had completely forgotten, and in any case had not read the Vicar's letter. Looking back, I wonder if better advertising and one or two meetings addressed by a really good speaker, might not have had a valuable effect. However this could only have helped, and not been a substitute for the house to house visiting." There was one suggestion for open air meetings, "I would have thought there was a very real place for open air evangelism, so long as there were no prayers, no hymns, no long address, but just the cut and thrust of question and answer. The speaker should be a specialist in this sort of thing, and not necessarily a member of the team. This should be effective; we have no reason to assume that people want to pray or sing hymns, but we do know that they are often ready to argue." Another suggestion is that "the use of literature might have been extended to cover a bookstall, or better still if possible, through the newsagents and bookshops in Wimbledon."

We may end with two comments which express the reactions of those who took part, and with which I think all would agree, if they did not put it into words. "I am very thankful for the experience, and personally I learnt a lot." "I was very grateful for the daily Celebration, which provided the centre each day from which we went out."

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